STATEMENT BY

MS. CYNTHIA CHIGWENYA,

AFRICAN YOUTH AMBASSADOR FOR PEACE

FOR SOUTHERN AFRICA,

AT THE

SECOND AFRICAN UNION REFLECTION FORUM ON

UNCONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES OF GOVERNMENT IN

AFRICA (ACCRA II PROCESS ON UCG)
Your Excellencies, Distinguished Participants,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

While preparing my remarks for today, I contemplated the experience from which I would draw my reflections, either as one of the five African Youth Ambassadors for Peace or reflecting on my work with political parties in Africa at the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. And to be honest, these professional capacities are a privilege and may be limiting in representing reflections of the average youth. So today, allow me to speak simply as a young African.

First, the state of democracy, not just in Africa but globally, is concerning. This is even more true in a time in which we observe a remarkable, if not dramatic, decline of democratic standards. Unfortunately, I cannot remind us of the euphoria and hope that the dawn of democracy brought in the 70s and 80s as I was not born yet. What I can reflect on, however, are recent developments, and the question is:

Why is democracy, which in principle is very progressive, losing arguments that it should win and military governments winning arguments they should lose? Why have we witnessed the popularity of military coups with notable and indisputable civilian support despite adopting and endorsing the Malabo Declaration of 2022? This is substantiated by the increased number of suspended AU member states in 2023, constitutional crises, an open disregard for the rule of law, and continued dynasties in democratic republic systems.

Second, for young people, economic challenges such as rampant unemployment, worsening food insecurities, and limited adaptive capacities to climate change leave us questioning the extent to which democracy can deliver public goods and the extent to which youth are co-creators in designing responses to the above crises with both regional and global implications. We need to have the courage to address and reflect on these realities at this and other fora.

I guess that leaves Africa at a critical point, a continent in transition. How can we understand democracy as it is and aim towards democracy as it should be? The answer is in committing to inclusive and functional institutions. Admittedly, participatory governance, in and of itself, is not a solution. However, it enables co-creation – an acknowledgement that, in the interim, the state and its people are in partnership despite uncertainties. Bridging marginalisation is an antidote to alternatives such as protesting, coups, and radicalisation, which are transitory and don’t offer long-term prospects.

In line with the historical global context, I want to share an account retold by a Tanzanian politician I met: the story of Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, after whom the AU’s peace and security building is named. In conversation with a Singaporean statesman, President Nyerere shared a well-known adage: “When elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers.” However, a question ensued: What happens when elephants make love? And as you guessed it right, the grass still suffers.

Africa, yes, finds itself at a point of several transitions, not just in democracy but also in its demographic compositions, emerging technologies that ought to change lives in various unimaginable ways, a world in need of clean energy and a safe environment amid rising geopolitical tensions. Are we, as Africans, aware of this potential and prepared enough to capitalise on the opportunities it brings in our growing role on the global scene, including in the G20? In reference to the adage, the grass should adapt and stop its suffering, regardless of what the elephants do.

Adapting to these new realities at the national level can be enhanced by encouraging member states to prioritise developing and implementing National Action Plans (NAPs) on peace and
security. By this, I am not just referring to the ceremonious enactment of new laws but meaningful initiatives that give states the upper hand in to determine and interpret what global developments mean for their specific contexts. National, and regional-level efforts are critical and can enhance democracy.

The international community, too, our development partners are a part of the equation. It is essential to consider new approaches in partnering with Africa. The Ezulwini Consensus and calls for reform are not a threat. In contrast, they signal a hope for the same inclusive architecture I have underscored as necessary at the national and regional levels. Without which international institutions are implicated, become less attractive, and create gaps for alternatives that may not be in the best interests of democracy, global security, and development.

Before I conclude, I would be remiss if I did not borrow from my culture to illustrate more about shared interests. I am Shona speaking, and in my language, we say mamukasei, meaning good morning. The response is tamuka kana mamukawo, meaning I am okay if you are okay. This response applies in the afternoon and is embedded in concepts like Ubuntu in South Africa or ubumuntu in Kinyarwanda.

Our humanity is interconnected. Conflicts such as the Russo-Ukraine war, tensions in the Middle East, and geopolitical competition have implications which are felt disproportionately here at home. Conflicts create weak and failed states that worsen criminal activity while instability short-circuits genuine partnerships for economic growth and continues to mar democratic aspirations. Therefore, peace and security must be everyone’s business. Tamuka kana mamukawo.

In closing, your Excellencies,

Allow me to thank the AU Commission and the PSC for their continued efforts to mainstream youth in the continent’s peace and security architecture and commendable initiatives, including the support given to the Youth Ambassadors Peace, the adoption of the Bujumbura Declaration on YPS and the establishment of the Wise-Youth network reimagined after the Panel of the Wise of the African, Peace and Security Architecture (APSA). We must continue to dedicate resources to counter the incentivised nature of conflicts, which, coupled with economic challenges, leave our peers susceptible, perpetrators and victims. State security must and should be designed in line with human security.

Overall, I am yet to be convinced that the celebrations we see towards unconstitutional changes of government are, indeed, a clear-cut jubilation and preference for military leadership rather than a protest against democracy and its deficiencies.

What African youth harbour is not mere dissatisfaction with the status quo but hope—hope for a different reality and a signal that maybe, in protest, we can finally realise aspirations for a prosperous and peaceful Africa.

The onus is on you, our leaders, your excellencies, to redirect that hope and energy towards what we rightly know is sustainable, and that is neither military rule nor civilian impunity. We need accountability, good governance, and inclusive, participatory democracies.

May God Bless Africa.

Thank you!